

# Dossier—Negotiating Urban Spaces: Access, Care and Confinement in Contemporary Gendered Performance

INDU JAIN AND TRINA NILEENA BANERJEE

---

This dossier explores the ways in which theatre and performance practitioners across the globe have addressed the deeply gendered modes of differential access to public spaces, institutional support, and resources through their creative as well as activist work, during the pandemic and its aftermath. In the last three years, the pandemic has transformed experiences of urban space globally. Access to public space has always been gendered as well as shaped by geographical location, race, caste, class and sexual identity. These traditional modes of differential access have been radically reorganized by the isolation and uncertainty engendered by the global pandemic. While ‘working from home’ was certainly not an option for everyone (most notably, care-workers in an overwhelmingly feminized profession), confinement to domestic space also meant escalating incidents of gendered violence for others. Additionally, the lack of sustainable income opportunities meant, as contributions to this dossier will demonstrate, the stripping away of roofs from over the heads of vulnerable citizens, whether impoverished artistes in want of state support or migrant workers on an uncertain daily wage. Staying at home was no longer an option, because ‘home’ often ceased to exist as a viable shelter, whether literally or by implication. For performers and theatre-workers all over the world, it was a time of intensified precarity: not only a loss of employment and income, but also a growing sense of artistic and professional purposelessness. While some were able to reorient this bewilderment through virtual and digital performances, for many grassroots performers, especially in the global South, access to these modes of public engagement were limited. In countries like India, street theatre activists felt unable and unwilling to switch to the digital space, while the prohibition on public assembly struck an irrevocable blow to women’s protest movements.

In curating the dossier, we began with the following questions: did the pandemic entrench the traditionally gendered divisions between the public and the private even further? What were the implications of such an entrenchment for women and non-men as well as those with marginalized sexual identities? What kinds of gendered performances or feminist articulations were constrained or bolstered by these transformations? What did confinement to the domestic space mean for the female performer? What kinds of economic precarity were specific to the gendered experience of performance and theatre work? What were the implications of the

lopsided nature of gendered labour at a time when care work within and outside the home had become the utmost priority? How were women's articulations of political dissent affected by the embargo on public assembly and lack of access to the street?

While it is evident that gender- and class-based as well as racialized precarity was exacerbated exponentially by the crisis of the pandemic globally, performers and theatre-workers also found newer ways of collectivizing, resisting and subverting the deficit of care perpetuated by the institutions of the state. In some cases, governmental neglect amounted to a systematic abdication from duties and in others a near-brutal abandonment of the most vulnerable sections of the population. The contributions to this dossier, which were a response to a call put out by the editors early in 2023, come from locations as diverse as Hungary, Turkey, South Africa, India and the United States of America. Yet, significant political and aesthetic threads emerge, connecting these pieces to each other and often putting them in perceptive dialogue. The conversations that emerge are revelatory of the surprisingly analogous ways in which neoliberal and authoritarian states respond to political and economic crises of this magnitude. What becomes clear is that, in each of these contexts, those who are already marginalized are rendered the most precarious. However, despite these constraints, in some instances, remarkably imaginative insights and opportunities are arrived at by artistes in collaboration with supportive and progressive institutions, in resistance to the overarchingly conservative policies of the state. In other contexts, individual 'artists' start impromptu occupations that turn into nation-wide protest movements demanding legitimate access to governmental resources and support. In yet others, minimalist street performances viscerally record how the pandemic deepens existing states of destitution and despair for larger and larger masses of people. In each of these instances, performers and theatre activists become historians of the present: staging the immediate and archiving through embodied performance, that which falls through the cracks of institutional memory and official history. While, as editors, we began conceiving this project as a response to gendered precarity amongst performers in the wake of the worldwide pandemic, the contributions, in dialogue with each other, point clearly to the fact that conditions of such precarity cannot be understood without taking into account the global inequalities of economic access and the intensely racialized crisis of care. In India, these factors are further complicated by caste hierarchies and oppressive labour practices often entrenched as ritualized humiliation. However, each contribution highlights, in its specific way, the unique precarity of creative artistes and practitioners whose work depends crucially on 'liveness' and the possibility of embodied assembly. Several contributors, therefore, highlight the critical political potential of live (even 'digitally live') action for societal and communitarian transformation in times of debilitating crisis.

Ever since the pandemic, there has been a much more pertinent need to employ a variety of platforms to create spaces of solidarity and to articulate a critical politics grounded in intersectional feminism that favours collective actions and assemblies. The 'political potential in unpredictable assemblies'<sup>1</sup> and the precarious modes of public engagement post-pandemic led to multiple registers of resistance as well as transformation of public spaces – like digital and social media as a public space.

Hence, it becomes imperative to highlight the new relation between various kinds of texts – performative and political – like state policies, citizenship acts etc. and social actions in these newly formulated and (re)organized spaces as an ‘ethnography of texts’<sup>2</sup> through the medium of gendered performances. These socially engaged feminist performative works create aesthetic and activist partaking between people, communities, public spaces and their environment. After the lockdown, the endeavours to democratize the public spaces, like the streets, state buildings and public subways, foreground the historical necessity of shaping and enabling feminist acts and protests to counter the dominant narratives of heteropatriarchy, structural inequities, gender, class and caste inequalities. The claustrophobia and confinement experienced during the crisis further enhanced the need for accessible public spaces for all and especially women. Political performative acts, like artists demanding relief funds from the government and challenging the draconian state policies, and, in India, the haunting and dehumanizing spectacle of migrant labourers forced to walk thousands of kilometres back home, bring into sharp focus the vacuousness of the ‘right to the city’, together with the incongruity within the discourse of citizenship.

The essays herein attempt to retrieve such ‘micro histories’ in contemporary times, wherein the pandemic forced the theatre community to examine constantly shrinking public spaces to carry on radical experimental work, but also challenged the artistes to create new permutations to enable different modalities of performances in the face of the undetermined precarity. For example, Kornélia Deres’ contribution – ‘Performing Womanhood and Carefare in Hungary’ – takes an incisive look at the ways in which Hungarian female performers in 2022 challenged normative notions of femininity imposed on them by the restrictive state policies, ostensibly formulated to address the widespread crisis of care. In a piece that brings together astute social critique with performance history, Deres shows how the ideological underpinnings of Carefare policies in Hungary, as well as the politically loaded statements made in their support by the ministers of the state, regularly favoured heteronormative families where women traditionally performed ‘triple-shift’ work. In erasing gendered labour from histories of care work and seeing motherhood as natural/instinctive nurture, the state’s discourse invisibilized the disproportionately feminized labour that sustained the regular care of children nationwide. Performers addressed it in the best way they could: by bringing the exhaustion and chaos straight to the stage. The two productions that Deres discusses – *Baby Bumm – Propinquity Effect* and *God, Home, Kitchen – or I have already parked in the middle of Bajcsy Street today* – shrewdly bring into focus and visibilize the work of social reproduction – as messy, demanding and exhausting – by making it a part of the performance. The enhanced precarity and the massive burden of care work on women during the pandemic is matched only by the lack of actual care on the part of the state and the increasingly desensitized governmental discourse. In bringing toddlers onto the stage, *Baby Bumm* creates an effect of ‘propinquity’ with the audience. In doing so, it sutures together the event of performance with its conventionally invisible interstices, while ethically challenging the existing norms of civility governing relations of spectatorship in the performance space.

In her introduction to the book *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression*, Tithi Bhattacharya writes:

Capitalism ... acknowledges productive labour for the market as the sole form of legitimate 'work,' while the tremendous amount of familial as well as communitarian work that goes on to sustain and reproduce the worker, or more specifically her labour power, is naturalized into nonexistence. Against this, social reproduction theorists perceive the relation between labour dispensed to produce commodities and labour dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism. The framework thus seeks to make visible labour and work that are analytically hidden by classical economists and politically denied by policy makers.<sup>3</sup>

The fundamental feminist insights of social reproduction theorists are tellingly highlighted once again in Christina Banalopoulou's contribution on gender and labour in the Turkish Public Theatre during the pandemic. Banalopoulou insightfully coins the term 'viral interstitiality' in order to mark the resonances and intersections between actual and fictional contagions. The essay discusses the restaging in 2020 of a 2013 production of *Melek*, a monodramatic play based on the life of Turkish actor Melek Kobra (1915–1939) who died of contagious tuberculosis at the Cerrahpaşa Hospital. While Kobra's disease prevented her from embodying the role of the healthy and able female actor representative of the secularized and modern Turkish nation, her failure to approximate this national ideal also marginalized her fragile and dying body from the story of the rapidly modernizing nation. Unlike many instances where the possibilities and resources open to alternative feminist performances shrunk regrettably because of the pandemic, in the case of *Melek*, an autonomous and ideologically progressive feminist collective was able to enter the space of Turkish public theatre, owing to the unique contingencies of the time. This became possible, Banalopoulou points out, despite the overarching anti-feminist stance of the authoritarian government in power. Both strategically and aesthetically, the show broke new ground, blurring the lines between 'artistic' and 'backstage' labour. In this sense, as well as in viscerally embodying the marginalization of fragile, 'unproductive' and feminized bodies within the dominant discourses of the nation-state, *Melek* made space for radically feminist questions regarding 'ideal' bodies, the labour of care and the politics of social reproduction within the ordinarily conservative space of the Turkish public theatre.

Kelley Holley writes a *longue durée* narrative of the phenomenon of the 'subway crush' in the New York City metro since the early decades of the twentieth century, bringing into focus the sharply gendered implications of the paradox of trading space for mobility. The claustrophobia of intense physical proximity with potentially hostile strangers and the possibility of sexual assault in the case of vulnerable bodies have shaped the long history of gendered anxiety around subway travel. In the time after the pandemic, Holley writes, fewer women have returned to a regular commute by the subway, simply because, in being less occupied, the subway has turned far more dangerous for women. Both spatial density and emptiness can, therefore, prove threatening to those with already precarious embodied identities in society. The risks

of mobility must continually be weighed against its benefits, especially for women and 'others' of marginalized racial/sexual selves. Analysing the long-term costs of leaving these acutely political negotiations to individuals (once again pointing to the significant abdication of the state from the crucial work of care), Holley connects the quotidian inequalities and fraught politics of space in a modern metropolis to four plays separated by almost a century: Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), Elmer Rice's *The Subway* (1929), Rattlestick Theater's *M.T.A. Radio Plays* (2020) and *The Long Haul*, a 2020 play by D. Lee Miller, in order to arrive at illuminating conclusions.

Ahvana Paul, Tamalika Roy, Sumit Mondal and Shrinjita Biswas collectively focus on the artistic medium of street theatre which has remained somewhat marginalized in theatre historiography precisely because of its collective nature. It has also suffered branding as mere propaganda, devoid of formal experimentation, aesthetics or any spatial innovation. The immediacy inherent in street theatre, however, has strong postcolonial connotations as an alternative to the proscenium. Drawing from these possibilities, this essay counters limiting definitions of street theatre with the performance activism, or 'artivism' as Chantal Mouffe would call, displayed in the Street Theatre festival organized by People's Little Theatre in Kolkata, November 2022. The post-pandemic return of people to public spaces is marked by the articulations of anger, suffering, pain and protest; nevertheless, the performance activists succeeded in making the street a democratic space after the dreadful lockdowns. These performances raised collective concerns, even when performed by a single artist, and the representations of multi-vocal, multi-sited political debates opened up the space of the street to authentic activism. Women's voices emerged as a significant aspect of this artivism: gestures that persistently questioned the positioning of the street in the binary between domestic and public space, and through a commitment to protest against gender-based violence. The festival, held in a public ground within the physical space of a university, also presented important questions regarding the 'ownership' of urban public space that largely determines expressions of flaneuse-ian romanticism around the street. The essay offers an overview of artistic modes that engage with the politics of our times, wherein it argues that artivism has the potential to take political art to smaller constituencies and invite critical responses.

Carla Lever's contribution presents one of the most fascinating instances of resistance and performative protest in this dossier. An artist's impromptu occupation of the South African National Arts Council's offices in Johannesburg (demanding that the officials address the prolonged non-payment of the dues from the government's artist support funds) became what Lever calls 'a durational act of care'. This sixty-day occupation challenged the government's rhetoric, which emphasized staying at home as an act of care for fellow citizens during the pandemic, with the radical assertion that 'the most egregious breach of care belonged to the State: it was their failure that had directly resulted in artists losing the very roof over their heads'. By continually livestreaming her act of occupation and the performances therein, Sibongile Mngoma, the immensely popular Black opera singer, turned 'digital liveness' into both her personal guarantee of safety and a strategy of magnification for her own embodied act of protest as a part of a nation-wide movement for the dignity

and survival of artistes at a time of crisis. Through interviews with Mngoma herself, the essay also makes penetrating observations of the racialized organization of contemporary modes of protest. Mngoma's critic of racialized 'civility' in politics highlights how street protests, which are far more precarious and riskier (not just at a time of contagion), remain the domain of Black people, while other races restrict themselves to the safety of 'keyboard activism'. The digitally live, however, also significantly becomes an archive of the present for Mngoma's durational protest, highlighting once again one of the early observations that we began this dossier with: at a time of crisis, precarious artistes emerge as radical historians of the present.

## NOTES

- 1 Judith Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- 2 Sara Ahmed, 'The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism', at [https://www.kent.ac.uk/clgs/documents/pdfs/Ahmed\\_sarah\\_clgscolloq25-09-04.pdf](https://www.kent.ac.uk/clgs/documents/pdfs/Ahmed_sarah_clgscolloq25-09-04.pdf).
- 3 Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), p. 2.

INDU JAIN ([indujain81@gmail.com](mailto:indujain81@gmail.com)) is an Associate Professor of English at Janki Devi Memorial College, Delhi University, India. Her areas of interest include post-colonial theory and literatures, Indian literature in English translation, feminist theory and performance studies. She is deeply interested to probe the lacunae that exist in the feminist theatre historiography within the performance space. She has published widely on contemporary Indian feminist theatre and pedagogy. She has been the convener of the Feminist Research Working Group, International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) since 2019. She is a research fellowship awardee from the Eric Auerbach Institute of Advanced Studies, Cologne (Germany).

TRINA NILEENA BANERJEE ([trina.banerjee@gmail.com](mailto:trina.banerjee@gmail.com)) is an Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta (CSSSC, Kolkata). Her research interests include gender, performance, political theatre, theories of the body, postcolonial theatre and South Asian history. Her book *Performing Silence: Women in the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal* was published by Oxford University Press (India) in October 2021.